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ABSTRACT

The media's portrayal of the ideal body image has been shown to be a large determinant of one's body image perception. The desire to be excessively thin can be conceived of as an artifact of Whi' e-American culture largely due to the media's influence. This study looks at cultures that have had limited exposure to the American ideal and examines differences in perceptions of body image. Previous research has suggested the existence of cultural differences in body satisfaction, with Caucasian Americans exhibiting excessive concern about their current weight and body image. A 4 X 4 factorial (culture x body image measure design) was used to compare female body image perceptions of Caucasian Americans, African-Americans, Hungarians, and former Soviet Georgians. A significant culture-by-body-image measure interaction was found, with White-Americans showing more desire to be thin than all other cultural groups. Georgian and Hungarian women also preferred an ultra-thin body which could mean that they had adopted the White American ultra-thin ideal through brief exposure to American culture. African-American women, however, were relatively satisfied with their body image which can be attributed, in part, to a lack of internalization of the White American standards for beauty and fashion. Contains 15 references. (RJM)

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Running head: CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

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Cross-Cultural Examination of Women's Body Image Perception

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Abstract

This study investigated cultural differences in women's body image perception. Previous research has suggested that cultural differences in body image satisfaction exist, with Caucasian Americans exhibiting excessive concern about their current weight and body image. A 4 X 4 factorial, culture x body image measure design, was used to compare female body image perceptions of Caucasian Americans, African-Americans, Hungarians, and former Soviet Georgians. A significant culture by body image measure interaction was found, with White-Americans showing more desire to be thin than all other cultural groups. These results are discussed in terms of higher incidence of eating disorders and measures of psychological well-being.

Cross-Cultural Examination of Women's Body Image Perception

The media's portrayal of the ideal body image has been shown to be a large determinant of one's body image perception. In fact, one's perception quite readily changes upon exposure to advertising and programming that emphasize the pursuit of the ideal body (Myers & Biocca, 1992).

The recent emergence of the ultrathin Western ideal has been paralleled by an increase in dieting and a decrease in the size of the ideal figure among women in the United States (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). The desire to be excessively thin can be conceived of as an artifact of White-American culture largely due to the media's influence. Therefore, it seems of no small import to study cultures that have had limited exposure to the American ideal. The present study will do this by studying differences among White Americans, African-Americans, and two former Eastern Block groups.

Researchers investigating African-American women's body image perception have suggested that, compared to White women, Black women are not as concerned about their weight and being thin. Self-esteem levels of Black women are not as highly correlated to their body image perception as those of their White counterparts (Thomas, 1989), and Black women are less likely to engage in dysfunctional eating and dieting behaviors than White women (Rucker & Cash, 1992; Thomas & James,1988). Furthermore, Allan, Mayo, and Michel (1993) found that Black women of lower socio-economic status preferred a heavier ideal figure than White women, regardless of status. These differences are of no small significance since the incidence of anoretic and bulimic behaviors is significantly less frequent among African- Americans (Dolan,

1991; Gray, Ford, & Kelly, 1987; Pumariega, Edwards, & Mitchell, 1984).

Cultural differences also exist among various Western cultures. Tiggemann and Rothblum (1988) observed that while Australian women dieted and exercised more than American women, they were more comfortable and satisfied with the external appearance of their body. Similarly, Hamilton and Chowdhary (1989) found that Scottish women, while dissatisfied with many of the same body parts as American women (e.g. hips, buttocks, etc.), were less able to differentiate among their various body parts and thus may have been less obsessive about this concern. In a similar cross-cultural study which investigated the effects of American White culture, Ford, Dolan, and Evans (1990) observed that Arabian women who attended the American University in Cairo, in contrast to their non-university counterparts, showed an urge to be thinner, similar to that of American Whites.

Since exposure to American ideals can affect one's conception of an ideal body type, it is propitious to study Eastern European conceptions of body image before these cultures become more Westernized as a result of the end of the Cold War. A review of the literature revealed no studies involving subjects from the former Eastern Block. However, with the lifting of the Iron Curtain, it is now possible to conduct research on these countries.

The present study, therefore, took advantage of this opportunity by collecting data from two former Eastern Block countries, Hungary and the Republic of Georgia. Data were collected from two American samples, Caucasian and African Americans, since previous research (Thomas, 1989; Thomas & James, 1988) has indicated that these two groups have different concepts of an attractive body and differing levels of bodily satisfaction. Thus the opportunity was provided to compare the Eastern European samples to two distinct American cultural groups.

It was hypothesized that dissatisfaction with one's body would be most prevalent among Caucasian Americans since the Eastern sample had most likely had less exposure to American ideals than natives of the United States. Furthermore, African-Americans were expected to be less concerned about being thin than Whites. The authors felt that the differences between Blacks and Whites would be maximized since the African-American sample was to be taken from a traditionally Black college in the deep South. The subjects in Thomas' (1989) and Thomas and James' (1988) studies were professional Black women from the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area and more likely immersed in White-American culture than the subjects in the current study.

Method

Subjects

Questionnaires were distributed to 165 female college students: forty-five Hungarians from a small Hungarian college, 40 from a small university in the Republic of Georgia, forty-one African-Americans attending a primarily black university in Durham, NC, and 39 Caucasian Americans attending a traditionally white college in Raleigh, NC. All subjects voluntarily completed the questionnaire in a group setting.

Materials

A questionnaire was developed using 9 scaled figure drawings of women and men ranging from very thin (1) to very heavy (9), taken from Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger (1983). (See Figure 1.) The questionnaire asked five questions, the first of which was open ended: a. Of the women on campus that are the same height as you, what percentage of these women weigh more than you do? (PERCENT HEAVIER); b. which figure is closest to your present figure (PRESENT); c. which figure is closest to what you want to look like (IDEAL); d. which

figure is most attractive to men (ATTRACTIVE TO MEN); and e. which male body image is most attractive to you (MEN). Question e. was referenced to the analogous set of male figure drawings. Answers to questions b. through d. served as the dependent measures in this study. Question a. was not analyzed since our Hungarian colleague indicated that his subjects were confused by this question. All cultural groups clearly understood all other questions.

This combination of subjects and measures resulted in a 4 X 4, culture by measures, design with the various cultures forming one predictor variable and the questions asked forming the other.

Procedure and Design

The questionnaire was distributed to all subjects in a group setting, after which the subjects were asked to read and answer all the questions. The Georgian and Hungarian questionnaires as well as the instructions were translated by native speakers of the respective languages.

Results

A 4 X 4, culture by measures, ANOVA with repeated measures on the measures factor was conducted. The ANOVA yielded a significant interaction, $F(9,480)=2.619$, $p<.01$, thus rendering the significant main effects uninterpretable (see Table 1). Figure 2 presents a graphic representation of this interaction.

The significant interaction mandated a test of simple main effects. That is, eight tests of simple main effects were called for, the effects of culture for each measure and the effects of measure for each culture. All eight tests were significant beyond the .001 level except the effect of measures for Black Americans, which was significant at the .01 level. Individual cell comparisons were then performed using the Newman-Keuls procedure as described by Winer

(1962).

Culturally, the Newman-Keuls analysis revealed that White and Black Americans' self reported scores of PRESENT body image were heavier than both Eastern samples. The White IDEAL female body image was significantly thinner than that of their Black American counterparts but significantly heavier than either the Hungarians or Georgians.

On the measure of ATTRACTIVE TO MEN, Black females scored significantly higher than all other groups. When choosing the ideal male figure, American Whites and Blacks preferred heavier men than either Georgians or Hungarians, while Hungarian women preferred heavier men than Georgians. (See Table 2).

Concerning measures, the Newman-Keuls analysis indicated that all cultures except Hungarians scored their IDEAL body shape and the body they thought was most ATTRACTIVE TO MEN as significantly thinner than their PRESENT body shape. The analysis revealed a similar pattern of results concerning MEN's body shape. (See Table 2 and 3).

Discussion

Differences between body image measures

If one looks at Table 2, it is obvious that the nature of the differences between body image measures is similar among cultures but the magnitude is different. While it is true, for example, that both Whites and Blacks saw their PRESENT body images as heavier than either the IDEAL or ATTRACTIVE TO MEN measures, it is evident from Tables 2 and 3 that this discrepancy is larger for Whites than it is for Blacks. Similarly, American Whites show a greater discrepancy between these measures than Hungarian women. Georgian women, however, show a pattern similar to that of American Whites. From this pattern, that obviously contributed to

the significant interaction, one can conclude that Blacks and Hungarians are relatively more happy with their current body image than American Whites and Georgians.

A similar component of this significant interaction applies to the differences between what women think men feel is attractive in women as compared to what women feel is attractive in men. White Americans, for example, exhibited a greater difference between these two measures than did any other group. These results seem to suggest that American White women, as opposed to the other groups in this study, are more prone to apply thin standards to themselves than to men. Considering these two findings, it is not surprising that anorexia and bulimia are more prevalent among middle-class American Whites than American Blacks (Dolan, 1991). These findings would predict that these disorders would be less likely to occur in either Hungary or the Georgian Republic.

One could, for example, give the EAT and the EDI to the cultures included in this study to test the above hypothesis. Presently, the current authors are conducting such a study, since a pilot study with a small number of subjects using the EAT has yielded significant results in line with this hypothesis.[1]

Differences between cultures

African-American women's relative satisfaction with their body image can in part be attributed to a lack of internalization of the White American standards for beauty and fashion by African-American women (Thomas, 1989). Although these women may be somewhat sensitive to the ultrathin American ideals, the results indicate they do not consider achieving these ideals important. This observation is in accord with the suggestion of Edwards, Hewitt, and Gray (1993) that American Blacks seem to be more satisfied with their bodies than American Whites

since they report less discrepancy between their current and ideal body images. Thomas and James (1988) have further suggested that these cultural differences might be due to African-American men's preference for heavier women.

The fact that the Georgian and Hungarian women preferred an ultra-thin body could be interpreted to indicate that they had adopted the White American ultra-thin ideal through brief exposure to American culture since the older literature indicates a heavy body type was preferred in Eastern countries in the past (Rudofsky, 1972). The possibility of a rapid change is consonant with the findings of Ford et al. (1990) who observed that a sample of Middle-Eastern women adopted the White American bodily ideal after a relatively brief exposure to White American culture. Evidence that American attitudes toward eating and body image may be influencing Georgians is indicated by the appearance of diet-food on their grocery shelves during the past two years.

The authors, however, do not contend that these cultural differences can be explained by any simple one-factor model. In Georgia, for example, food is at a premium, and gasoline and automobiles are not readily available. A preference for a slender figure may be a way of coping with a largely unavoidable reality. Most likely, one's preference for a certain body type is the complex interaction of many factors, such as cultural, individual-cognitive, and geographical factors. Discovering the reasons for these cultural differences suggests an exciting research agenda for the future. One could, for example, look at the models of women in the popular media across time in these countries as Wiseman, et al. (1992) have done in the United States. Thus, one could see if the cultural ideals of these Eastern Block countries have changed along with those of the United States. One could even see if dramatic events like the lifting of the Iron

Curtain coincided with changes in the popular media.

Upon cursory consideration such a study may seem inconsequential. However, the pattern of satisfaction between Blacks and Whites in this study mirrors the prevalence of eating disorders between the same two groups. Research of this sort may provide clinicians with valuable clues in this life and death matter.

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Author's Note

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Footnotes

[1]This interpretation of the interaction was bolstered by some additional data analysis. A one way ANOVA between cultures using discrepancies between present and ideal body image yielded significant results, $F(3,161) = 3.212$, $p < .05$. Newman-Keuls post-hoc tests indicated that American Whites and Georgians show significantly more dissatisfaction than African-Americans. A similar ANOVA using differences between what is perceived to be attractive in men and women yielded highly significant results, $F(3,158) = 4.459$, $p < .01$ with a Newman-Keuls post-hoc analysis. Thus, American Whites seem to show a significantly greater disparity than all other cultural groups.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance: Cultures by Body Image Measures

Source	df	MS	F
Between subjects	163		
Culture (A)	3	28.9959	19.364***
SSE	160	1.4974	
Within subjects	492		
Measure (B)	3	24.6521	48.193***
A X B	9	1.3396	2.619*
Error	480	0.5115	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Table 2

Individual Cell Comparisons by Culture via Newman-Keuls Procedure

	White	Black	Hungarian	Georgian
Present	3.795[a]	3.900[a]	3.159[b]	3.171[b]
Ideal	2.923[a]	3.625[b]	2.591[c]	2.341[d]
Attractive	2.731[a]	3.563[b]	2.773[a]	2.610[a]
Men	3.872[a]	4.012[a]	3.386[b]	3.195[c]

Note. Means with differing superscript letters indicate significant differences at least at the .05 level.

Table 3

Individual Cell Comparisons by Measure via Newman-Keuls Procedure

	Present	Ideal	Attractive	Men
White	3.795[a]	2.923[b]	2.731[c]	3.872[a]
Black	3.900[a]	3.625[b]	3.563[b]	4.012[a]
Hungarian	3.159[a]	2.591[b]	2.773[c]	3.386[d]
Georgian	3.171[a]	2.341[b]	2.610[c]	3.195[a]

Note. Means with differing superscript letters indicate significant differences at least at the .05 level.

Figure 1. Female and Male Scaled Figure Drawings Used in Questionnaire

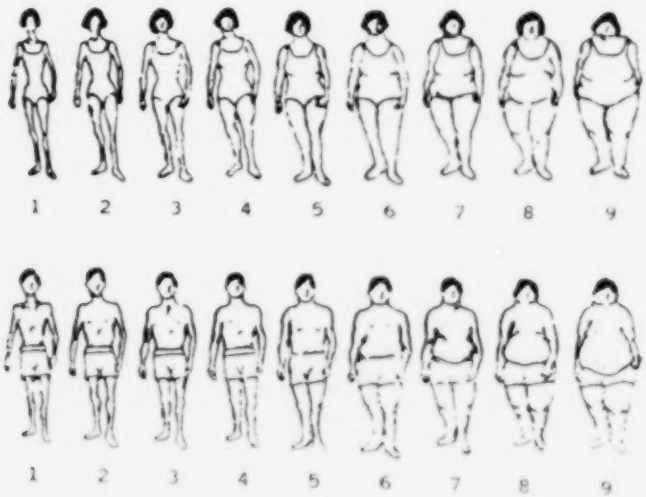

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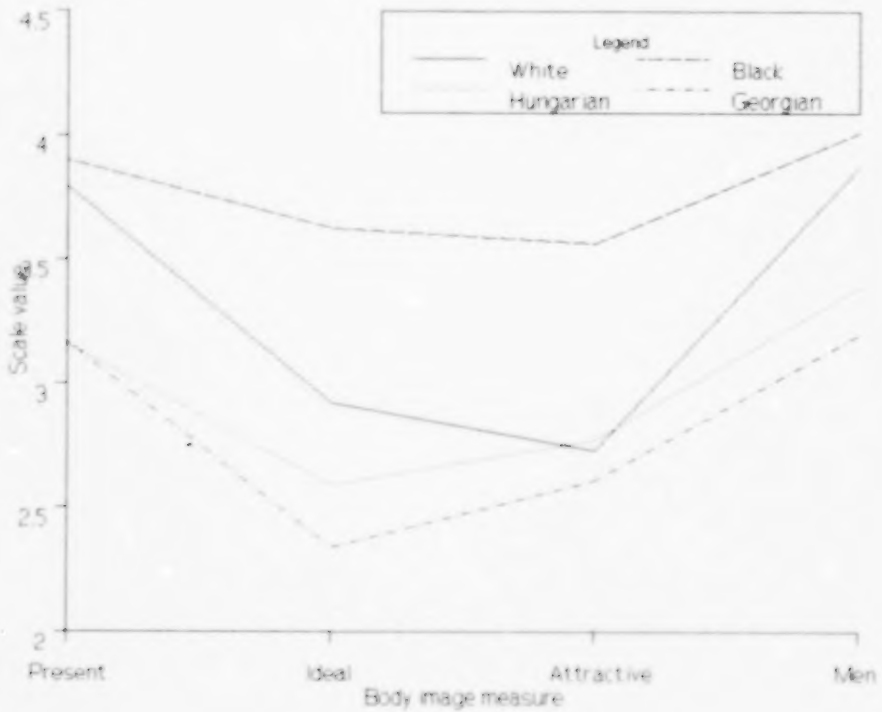
Figure 2. Body image measure by culture



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